



HOW TO THRIVE

# Meet Marguerite Maddox – the Detroit championing mobility rights, one city meeting at a time

*Unstoppable advocate is well-known for amplifying the need to make Detroit more inclusive and accessible*



by Laura Herberg  
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Marguerite Maddox listens to a Detroit City Council meeting on March 12. Photo credit: Laura Herberg

Marguerite Maddox stood up and wheeled her walker to the lectern at a **Detroit City Council meeting in mid-March**. Her service dog, a yellow Labrador named Scarlet, was by her side.

Normally, public commenters at City Council meetings get just two minutes to speak, but for Maddox, the time limit is almost always waived.

If you've attended a city meeting in Detroit, you've likely heard Maddox speak: She's been participating in public comment for decades. For the past few months, she's been attending only online, using the name "Marguerite Maddox & Scarlet."

"This is my first time back here this year," the 68-year-old Detroiters told councilmembers, slowly and deliberately. She has cerebral palsy, which can make it difficult to articulate and move muscles associated with speech. She is also hard of hearing.

"I've been listening to everything, trying to hear everything, and it was hard for me to pick up on different voices," Maddox told councilmembers, while Scarlet sniffed the floor.

Even though Maddox had been sitting in the front row, some councilmembers and presenters didn't speak loud enough for her to hear. Multiple times, Maddox interrupted the meeting to ask them to speak up. During her public comment, she asked the city's media department to make adjustments "in a way that we can hear everything ... (for) me and others that have hearing loss."

Maddox uses various methods to help her understand what people are saying. At this council meeting, she wore a Reizen Mighty Loud, a device with a tiny microphone that pumps up the sound from a room into headphones. She was also looking at her phone and the screens mounted in the Committee of the Whole



Room to watch sign language interpreters and read closed captioning, two services that Maddox urged the city for a decade to implement.

"I complained about that year after year, year after year, and nothing was being done about it until in June or July of 2020," Maddox told us. "It should have never taken that long."



Marguerite Maddox, who is hard of hearing, takes advantage of closed captioning and sign language interpreters at public meetings whenever possible. She also listens to the meeting through a device that amplifies the sound around her. Photo credit: Laura Herberg



Marguerite Maddox speaking during public comment at a City Council meeting on March 12, 2024. Video credit: Laura Herberg

## **'Like Energizer batteries'**

Making city meetings accessible for people with disabilities is just one of the issues that compels Maddox to regularly give public comment at meetings for the **Detroit Department of Transportation, Board of Police Commissioners** and more. She even comments on **City Council budget hearings**. She cares about clean air, getting buses close to the curb so people who use a wheelchair or walker can board, and ensuring police know how to interact with people of color like herself. Her top issue right now, however, is sidewalk accessibility.

While walking from her senior apartment complex in New Center to the QLine stop about half a mile away, Maddox had on a bright orange-and-yellow reflective vest.

"Everywhere I go, I wear this vest for safety," she said. Scarlet was leashed to Maddox's walker as the pair moved into the roadway to avoid a driveway made up of bumpy asphalt.

Not long after, she pointed out a stretch of sidewalk with freshly poured cement that Maddox had bugged the city to repair.

"This did not come without me voicing my opinion," Maddox said.

Maddox is incredibly vocal about the sidewalk conditions in her area, but she doesn't just raise her voice about mobility concerns on the routes she takes. She teamed with Lisa Franklin of **Warriors on Wheels of Metropolitan Detroit** to report accessibility issues all over the city, with Maddox working as the photographer.



Franklin recalled how about a decade ago — days before the annual fireworks show on the Detroit River — the two of them urged the city to fix a broken ramp that was the only way for people using wheelchairs to access Hart Plaza.

"There was a huge dip there where the concrete was broken, and wheelchairs could not cross that path," Franklin said. She and Maddox showed up to a City Council meeting with photos. "They had that area paved over and (added) a new grate before the fireworks. It was within 10 days."

Through her advocacy, Maddox has developed a bit of a reputation.

"Marguerite Maddox is truly a Detroit and American treasure," City Council President Mary Sheffield said in an email to Outlier Media. "Her poignant efforts to hold government accountable to the people is a blessing to the masses particularly those in the disabled community. If every community had a Marguerite Maddox, the world would be a far better place."



Marguerite Maddox, 68, prefers to ride the QLine over the bus when she

Councilmember Fred Durhal III, who chairs the council's Disability Task Force, said in an email that he appreciates the way Maddox doesn't let barriers prevent her from doing her part to hold city officials accountable.

has time because she finds it easier to board with her rolling walker.  
Photo credit: Laura Herberg

"Ms. Maddox challenges us to ensure universal ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) design is incorporated in developments across the city, to create better transportation and para-transit systems, and to fix our sidewalks and infrastructure," he said.

And it's not just politicians who've noticed Maddox's efforts — she stands out in the advocacy community, too.

"She goes to many meetings, more than I could stomach," said **Michael Cunningham II, a transit advocate** known for handing out bus tickets and hand warmers in his free time. "She doesn't mind saying what's on her mind ... and she's like Energizer batteries. She keeps going, and going, and going — for the good of the people."

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## A born fighter

Maddox has been fighting since she came into the world. In 1955, she was born with an identical twin sister.



"She was the bigger one," Maddox said, while eating French toast and eggs at a downtown Coney Island.

Both girls had jaundice and were given a blood transfusion, Maddox said. Despite being smaller in size, Maddox survived, but her sister did not.

If her twin had made it, "we would have been each other's best friends."

Maddox said she was one of eight children, but grew up with just two siblings — twin brothers. Their biological mother, as Maddox makes a point of calling her, had abandoned them, and their maternal grandmother stepped in to raise them.

"The doctors, so-called 'medical professionals,' told my grandmother that I would never walk or talk like a normal person," Maddox recalled. "They advised her to put me in the institution.

"My grandmother said, 'No. She's going to learn how to read. She's going to learn how to talk. She's going to be a normal person.'"



Marguerite Maddox took this photo last October on Third Street north of Lothrop Road in Detroit to show the broken asphalt interrupting the sidewalk. She says it was just repaired about two weeks ago. Photo credit: Courtesy of Marguerite Maddox

It was her grandmother who first took Maddox to civic meetings, back when she was a teenager in Southwest Detroit.

"She would take us, meaning my brothers and I, to City Council meetings to see what would go on behind decisions."

Maddox said she went on to be the first person in her family to graduate high school. She went on to attend Madonna College — now known as Madonna University — where she studied natural sciences, but she dropped out after issues with a roommate.

In the 80s and 90s, Maddox completed adult education courses on physical therapy, computer applications and auto mechanics. But she didn't end up working in any of these fields. "They did not think that I could do the job because people may not want to give me a chance," she said.

Instead, Maddox went on to be an athlete. She competed in Paralympics around the world, including the 1988 Paralympic Games in Seoul, South Korea, where **she placed fourth in the 100-meter dash.**

Back in the United States, Maddox got involved in long-distance cycling. She participated in a ride from Atlanta to Washington, D.C. that included cyclists with and without disabilities.

"It did not matter what color you were. It did not matter what background you came from. We were all riding the same road together."

To train for these long-distance bike rides, Maddox cycled all around Detroit, the suburbs, rural areas and back.



"There were some times when I would ride 50-75 miles in one day," she said. She doesn't often ride anymore mostly because she doesn't want to leave Scarlet home alone. "I miss the freedom."

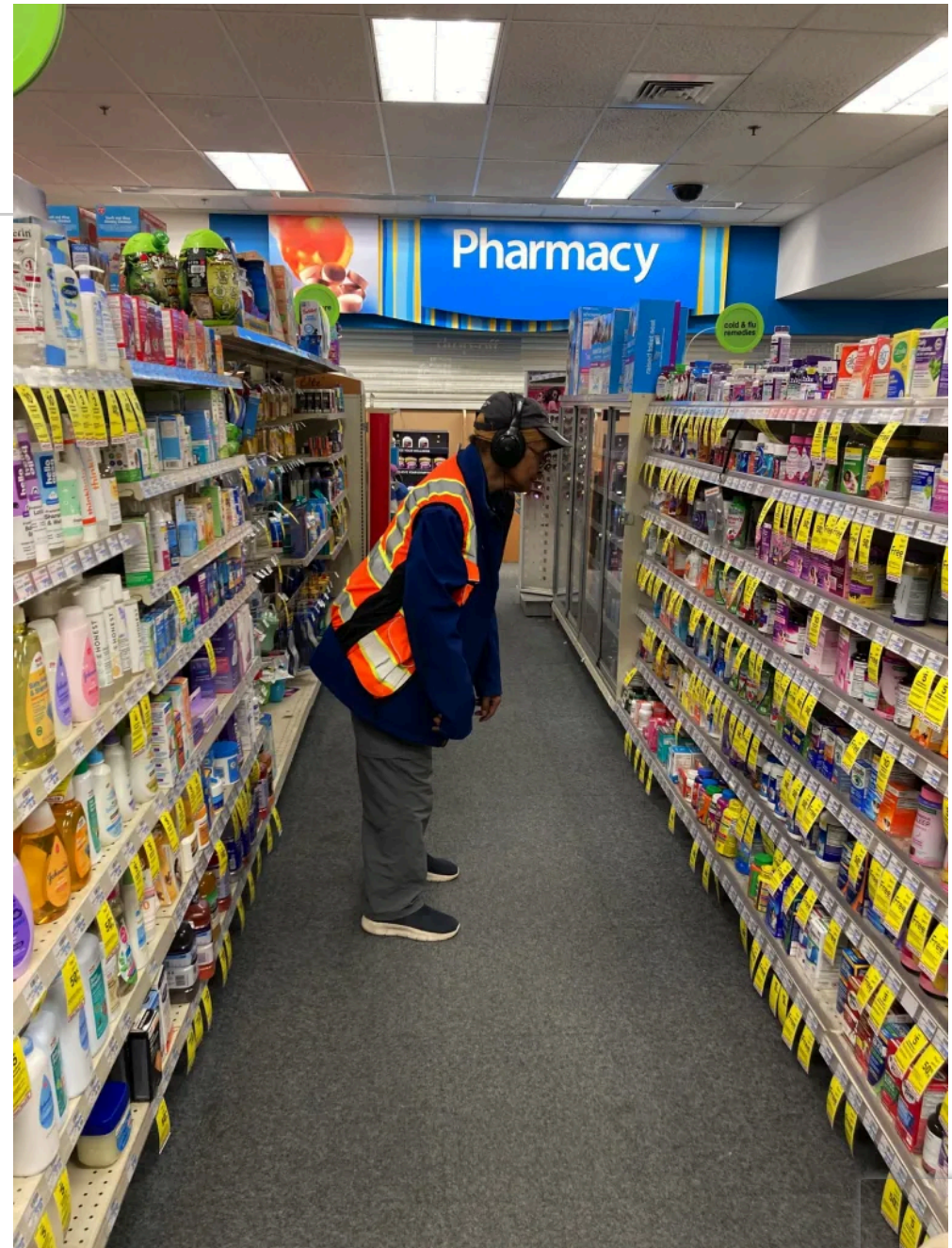
## Showing up

As soon as Maddox and Scarlet stepped into the elevator at the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center downtown, she was recognized.

"Good morning, Miss Marguerite," said a woman who works in the Mayor's Office. Maddox smiled back.

Once off the elevator, Maddox took a detour down the hall to say hello to a receptionist friend she made from coming down here. The woman stood up with a huge smile on her face and danced back and forth waving at Maddox. Maddox smiled and waved back.

"She knows that I come down here to see how she's doing," Maddox said.



While Marguerite Maddox ran errands downtown, she stopped to buy



Inside the Committee of the Whole Room, it wasn't long before people started coming up to her. One of them was Raymond Simpson, a staffer for City Council President Mary Sheffield, who simply wanted to say hello. The last time he saw Maddox in person, he gave her a ride to an event at Detroit Public Safety Headquarters. Maddox had been planning to take the bus, but it would have made her late.

"She's always showing up and showing out," Simpson said. "She's always, always around."

Councilmember Scott Benson also greeted her.

"You are on my mind," Benson told her, in the minutes before the meeting. "The other day, we saw something on Woodward around the MSU center where they're taking the sidewalk away."

"Yeah?" Maddox asked eagerly.

"There's no sidewalk," Benson said. "That day, I saw somebody who couldn't get around, they had to walk their walker into the street into Woodward to go across the street. No crosswalk. So it's very dangerous. So

Ramen noodles for herself and vitamins for her service dog, Scarlet.  
Photo credit: Laura Herberg



Detroit City Councilmember Scott Benson talks to mobility advocate Marguerite Maddox before the City Council meeting on March 12. Photo credit: Laura Herberg

we're working on it."

After Benson walked away, Maddox squeezed her fist and squealed with joy. She said she felt proud.

"Trying to make this city more accessible for everyone, it's everybody's responsibility."

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